BLUE RIDGE PARKWAY

Appalachian Mountains, Virginia and North Carolina

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INTRODUCTION TO THE SITE AS A CULTURAL LANDSCAPE: RECOGNIZING CULTURAL AND NATURAL RESOURCE VALUES

The Blue Ridge Parkway is a 469-mile linear cultural landscape that was constructed between 1935 and 1987. It is important historically because it was the first national rural parkway to be conceived, designed, and built as a leisure driving experience. The landscape architects and engineers who designed the roadway did so to maximize motorists' appreciation for the natural, cultural, and scenic qualities of the southern Appalachians. No other park in the country better represents the art of parkway design and construction as practiced in the 1930s, or has maintained the Blue Ridge Parkway's integrity for historic landscape design. The richness, significance and integrity of its built fabric led a 1993 draft historic resource study to suggest that the parkway be placed on the National Register of Historic Places as a continuous historic district including the 226 historic buildings, sites, and roadway structures along its length. While the parkway has not been formally nominated to the National Register, it is treated as eligible for planning and for environmental and cultural compliance purposes. The parkway's character also includes scenic views encompassing dramatic panoramas of mountain ranges and vernacular landscapes—pastoral scenes with rolling farmland, rail fences, old farmhouses, and churches—representative of the agricultural history of the region. While it is likely that significant archaeological resources lie within the park, a comprehensive archaeological survey and inventory have not yet been initiated due to a lack of funding.

The parkway follows the crests and ridges of five major mountain ranges in the central and southern Appalachians, and lies at an elevation ranging from 600 to 6,000 feet above sea level, encompassing several vegetative zones. Wildlife is abundant in the park; foxes, opossums, groundhogs, white-tailed deer, and an occasional black bear can be seen. The land along the parkway also provides habitat for less easily seen wildlife such as reptiles and amphibians. More than 100 species of birds migrate through the area in the spring. Park lands are home to 1,250 vascular plant species, 25 of which are rare and endangered, and 4 rare and endangered animal species. The park also encompasses 21 natural heritage areas and relatively uncommon high elevation mountain bogs.

BACKGROUND

The Blue Ridge Parkway includes a narrow corridor of land under federal ownership and managed by the National Park Service, but protection of land surrounding the parkway corridor and its viewsheds depends on cooperation between the National Park Service, county and municipal governments, and local citizens. The 469-mile-long roadway traverses 29 counties in Virginia and North Carolina. From Shenandoah National Park in Virginia, the parkway follows the Blue Ridge, an eastern rampart of the Appalachian Mountain chain, for 355 miles. For the remaining 114 miles, the parkway skirts the Black Mountains (named for their dark green spruce and fir), the Craggies, the Pisgahs, and the Balsams, ending in the Great Smokies of Great Smoky Mountains National Park in North Carolina and Tennessee.

When construction began in 1935, there was little precedent for building a roadway of this length strictly for the enjoyment of the driving public. The landscape architects and engineers who designed the roadway did so to maximize motorists' appreciation for the natural, cultural, and scenic qualities of the southern Appalachians. Major developed areas were constructed every 50 miles, and entrance and exit points spaced at distant intervals so as not to interrupt traffic flow. The roadway is designated noncommercial and promotes recreational opportunities instead. It was aligned to maximize the scenery it passes through, and has a wide right-of-way to provide an insulating strip of parkland to protect foreground views.

The legislation that created the Blue Ridge Parkway established no boundary. The width of the park corridor varies from approximately 800 feet to six miles, leaving many park viewsheds vulnerable to development in lands adjacent to the corridor. The original right-of-way for the park was purchased by the states of Virginia and North Carolina. All lands added to the park today are either acquired with federal funds, purchased with private sector funds and then donated to the park, or donated by private land owners. Land trusts also purchase lands or easements that they then transfer to the National Park Service. Only lands that are contiguous to the existing boundary can be purchased and added to the parkway.

THE ISSUE

Important viewsheds integral to the integrity and significance of the historic parkway are vulnerable to land use change because the federal government manages only a narrow corridor. There are more than 4,000 landowners adjacent to the park, with 60 percent of scenic viewsheds composed of private land.[i] These scenic resources are also critical to the region's tourism industry, so the development of incompatible land uses within viewsheds could have a negative economic effect. The disappearance of working farms and the loss of farmland is a critical issue in many of the counties through which the parkway passes. In some counties, there are no programs or regulations to preserve farmland.

To address this issue, National Park Service staff have initiated contacts with adjacent communities and county governments to protect park viewsheds. The park's Resource Planning and Professional Services Division, headquartered just outside of Asheville, North Carolina, developed a process for involving community members in viewshed analysis, at the same time encouraging a sense of ownership for the park and support for land protection. The division staff also provide information to municipal and county governments to help in the development of landscape protection methods.

METHODS

1. Scenic Resource Management Planning Process

Process Overview

Because scenery is such an important resource for the park, National Park Service staff are working with surrounding communities to develop an appreciation for it, and to offer assistance in developing methods to ensure scenic protection. Scenic resources are also critical to the region's tourism industry, so the development of incompatible land uses within viewsheds can have a negative economic effect. The park's Resource Planning and Professional Services Division, which is responsible for the maintenance of cultural resources and for cultural and natural resource compliance under the National Environmental Policy Act, but not for actual resource management, is also concerned with aesthetic quality. The division has developed a scenic analysis process that includes three phases: viewshed analysis, mapping of view areas, and view area scenic quality assessment. This process allows staff to identify the park's most important vistas based on the length of time travelers view each one, the elements that make up the vista, the vista's quality, and the degree to which the vista is threatened by development.

The Resource Planning and Professional Services Division essentially acts as a planning consultant to counties. Rather than pushing for regulation, the division's reports summarizing the results of the scenic analysis process promote a wide forum for community discussion about preserving views and landscapes. By recruiting the assistance of the public, especially local leaders, for the final phase of the process, park staff can help to inspire a collaborative stewardship process for protecting scenic landscapes. Park planners are able to work with counties and communities to illustrate the importance of protecting certain vistas and to provide information that will help them develop protection methods. These methods might include purchase of land or easements or directing development so that it is less visible from the park. One community chose to use the park's protective language to create a local ordinance dealing with telecommunication towers. The view area scenic quality assessment process calls attention to the lack of programs or regulations to preserve farmland in some counties, and may encourage the counties to adopt farmland protection measures, an important issue in much of the area.

Phase One: Viewshed Analysis
In the first phase of the process, viewshed analysis, a GIS software program is used to "look" from hundreds of points along the centerline of the park roadway and analyze what can be seen from any given point. The software then calculates the number of times a certain area is repeatedly seen (this process gives no information on the quality of the view). All that is visible is called a viewshed. The software uses digital elevation model tapes from the U.S. Geological Survey; adjustments are made by inputting field data on vegetation. The viewsheds are rated (indicated by color coding) according to the amount of foreground, middleground, and background; how long a motorist would see the view; and how many times a specific area would be included in viewsheds along the roadway. Red denotes long-duration views close to the viewer and blue represents fleeting glimpses well into the middle ground. Orange, yellow, and green fall somewhere in between, broken down incrementally by time and distance. This park-specific program was developed through a cooperative agreement with the Design Research Laboratory at North Carolina State University.

Phase Two: Mapping of View Areas
In phase two, park staff verify the data from phase one in the field by traveling to a particular site and mapping visual rooms or "view areas." These "view areas" are defined with a brief verbal descriptive phrase, and assigned a code with a letter (according to county) and a number.

Phase Three: View Area Scenic Quality Assessment
In phase three, view area scenic quality assessment, citizen field teams rate the quality of a view according to its scenic integrity. Criteria include vividness (the intensity, strength, or memorability of a scene), intactness (the lack of incompatible and intrusive change from an idealized landscape), and uniqueness (the rarity of the view in the local, regional, and national context). They also assess the vulnerability of the view by land ownership and land use. All of this information is combined to give a number rating to a view, with a higher score indicating a higher quality view that is perhaps more vulnerable to change, giving it a greater priority for protection.

Park staff have several suggestions for implementing phase three, the view area scenic quality assessment, which include:

Before the meeting:

- rehearse the logistics and know where everything is ahead of time
- don't use a hard sell when trying to recruit participants
- compose teams of different perspectives and talents, and consider using high school students as team members.

At the first meeting:

- take time for introductions

- teach the process at the first view area and expect it to take a long time
- assign everyone a specific task to be in charge of
- sincerely thank everyone for their input and time, state what you have learned from them, and make it clear that what they did helped and mattered.

Before or after the meeting:

- contact the local editor with a news release and photo to encourage an article.

One goal of the park staff is to include elected officials and civic leaders on the assessment teams in order to promote a "partnership" with the park and foster a commitment to viewshed protection. The park planning staff can use the information gained from the scenic quality assessment to work with county planners, helping them to develop methods of protection such as enacting new local ordinances, promoting scenic easements, or drafting design guidelines for new development.

National Park Service staff are not alone in working toward resource protection adjacent to the park. A coalition of organizations working to protect the cultural and scenic integrity of the park has developed and distributed a brochure, *Are You A Blue Ridge Parkway Neighbor?* The brochure describes conservation and scenic easements, gives information on land trusts and other organizations interested in purchasing land for protection, and provides contact information on planners and landscape architects who can help create compatible development.

2. Developing a Cultural Landscape Report

In 2001, Blue Ridge Parkway staff, working with the National Park Service Southeast Regional Office, began to develop a cultural landscape report as part of the general corridor management plan. A landscape architect at the regional level chose 21–22 cultural landscapes within the park representative of the corridor, and will conduct an inventory and analysis to determine which features are significant in order to develop treatments. This effort will help the park's staff to better measure the importance of cultural resources when resource managers enter into management discussions.

Project Review Process

The Parkway's Resource Planning and Professional Services Division has developed a project review process to minimize conflicts between cultural resource and natural resource managers. Previously, anyone proposing a project at the park would complete the planning and design phase of the project alone, then send out the plan for others to review. At that point, reviewers might be reluctant to ask for any major changes. As part of the pre-implementation phase of the new process, all players who will have an interest in a proposed project review it in the field before any design work begins. This generally happens in the spring for all projects proposed for that year. The group first identifies all the natural and cultural resources that will be affected by the project and then designs

solutions that address all natural, cultural, and scenic resource concerns. This is the point at which negotiations take place on planning and management issues. The team stays together throughout the course of the project, with the Resource Planning and Professional Services Division acting as the project gatekeeper and holding all the data on compliance. Park planning and resource management staff believe this new process works well and is an effective way to integrate natural and cultural resource concerns.

[i] U.S. Department of the Interior. National Park Service. Corridor Management Plan: Phase One. Blue Ridge Parkway. Virginia/North Carolina. June 30, 1996.